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Laura Leslie  
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RALEIGH, N.C. — Opponents of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline have been staging protests outside Gov. Roy Cooper's office this week, saying work on the interstate natural gas pipeline is damaging homes and property.

The small but determined group of protesters said Cooper's administration made a mistake by issuing the required permits for the 600-mile pipeline to run through eight counties in eastern North Carolina, and they are calling for a one-year moratorium on pipeline construction activities.

The \$6 billion pipeline is being built by a group of utilities, including Duke Energy and Dominion Energy, and will carry natural gas from hydraulic fracturing wells in West Virginia and Pennsylvania to southeast North Carolina.

Crews are already clearing land on sections of the pipeline corridor, and Tom Clark said he discovered last week that they had taken out a treasured tree on his family's property.

Clark said the pine had been left behind by his grandfather to provide shade for the family at the fishing hole on the farm.

"I know people are probably going to think I'm silly, [but] it was like a person. [It was] like pulling up on a car accident where you have a loved one lost because that tree was probably 80, 90 years old," he said.

Clark said he wasn't aware crews would be cutting trees on the farm because pipeline operators are notifying only affected property owners, not anyone who lives nearby. He said his cousin who holds the deed to the part of the family's farm where the cutting occurred lives out of state.

"This is land that's been in our family from generations to generation to generation. This is land where past generations have done without to pay the taxes on it so they could pass it on to future generations, and now Dominion's going to come through and take that away? I'm not going to let that happen," he said.

Dominion said it followed all of the rules and had all of the needed approvals, but Clark said the tree didn't need to be cut, noting one next to it was left standing. He said he would have talked to the pipeline crew if he had known they had started clearing trees in the area.

Cooper's office said in a statement that staffers met with the protestors and that the governor understands the concerns about environmental stewardship, but Clark said that won't replace his beloved "Grandfather Tree."

"You can't take Super Glue and stick an 80-year-old tree back up. It's going to take 80 years for that tree to get back to where it is now. I'll never live to see that," he said.

The governor and legislative leaders favor the pipeline, saying it will bring economic development and jobs to some of the state's most disadvantaged areas.

A state Department of Environmental Quality spokeswoman said the agency is working on an online portal to allow people to request information and to file complaints about the pipeline project as it moves forward.

Cooper has also caught flak over the pipeline from Republican lawmakers, who accuse him of extracting a \$57.8 million "slush fund" from Duke and Dominion in exchange for a key permit.

DEQ approved a water permit for the pipeline on Jan. 26, the same day Cooper announced the two utilities would put money into a fund that would help mitigate any environmental problems and would boost economic development in the counties the pipeline traversed.

The fund was put under Cooper's control, and he has said he planned to issue an executive order that would spell out how money would be disbursed.

Lawmakers didn't give him the chance, passing legislation last month to divvy the \$57.8 million among school districts in the eight pipeline counties.

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